Re-framing fashion: from original and copy to adaptation

Tiziana Ferrero-Regis

Abstract
This article discusses the interaction between original and adaptation in the fashion system; the study also analyses, at a micro level, practices of adaptation adopted by consumers when making and re-making fashionable clothes. The article shows that the distinction between original and copy is historically determined as it grew out of the romantic notion of the authentic work of art. This article suggests that, in the impossibility to determine copyright in fashion, adaptation is a better descriptor of practices that transform garments; the concept of adaptation also abolishes trite notions of fashion as pastiche or bricolage, arguing for as a way to look at the many variations and re-contextualisations of garments historically and cross-culturally.

Key Words: Fashion, adaptation, imitation, original, copyright, agency, creativity.

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My mother and I would travel for two hours and go to the city to buy European fabrics to make our Chanel suits out of Vogue *patterns*. (Rowen, New Zealand)

The quotation highlights a practice inherent in the fashion system: home dressmaking through copy and adaptation from a couture original. Partington notes that clothing produced by individual consumers through adaptation of patterns is contextualised as a watered down version of original couture.[1] In its most reductive form, this notion characterises fashion as commercial and exploitative. In addition, descriptors such as appropriation, imitation, copy and so forth have restricted the opportunity to understand fashion as a major global cultural form and institution. Therefore exploring and understanding the concept of adaptation will shift the attention from a

superficial assessment of original versus imitation or copy to adaptation as a practice that provides a better framework for the understanding of designers' and couturiers' innovative practices and creativity, and at the same time it describes the active engagement of consumers with fashion at the micro level. Thus adaptation can be seen under the dominant aspects of the cultural and the industrial, and the local and the global. Adaptation can also provide a way to understand different historical shifts in the fashion system, from individual creative agency with home dressmaking and re-making to the explosion of the mass market and the consequent abandonment of such practices. Home dressmaking has been replaced by fashion remix of mass produced garments, a practice that thrives in our current environment of globalised fast fashion. Thus this study suggests the need for a contextual requalification of concepts such as original, copy, and imitation and argues that these categories have been played against each other, but they are in fact interdependent and historically determined. This is an important step toward a study of fashion as a cultural form that has too often been associated with fickleness, novelty, exploitation and consumption-driven production. Fashion history and theory have seldom engaged with adaptation, copy and imitation, and their interdependence, as they usually have been debated within the discipline of copyright law,[2] and often with superficial accounts of designers copying and plundering from fashion's own past.[3] The institutionalisation of fashion from 1868 served as a way to control knowledge about production processes in fashion; on the other hand, adaptation practices, often subversive, have been fundamental to the democratisation of fashion. Today, big labels and conglomerates try to control knowledge and innovation through copyright, but as it will be demonstrated, fashion escapes copyright because, as Aspers argues, in fashion creativity is contextual.[4]

1. Fashion original

The conceptual understanding of fashion-original grew out of a heroic and Romantic narrative, whose aesthetic transferred onto fashion. The Romantic Movement advocated a clear distinction between original works as the result of imagination and innate creativity, and works of imitation that were impoverished by convention. Williamson points out that through this difference, an opposition between naturally creative and mechanical work was created, thus translating into an opposition between industry and art.[5] The concept of creativity was translated into the notion of the authentic work of art. In the fashion system, historically, these distinctions took the form of couture connected to a name. As Lipovetsky maintains, within a logic of profit-making connected to the capitalist system, haute couture owed its honorific recognition to the cult of individuality and hence of independent creative freedom.[6] Haute couture promised change, innovation and newness. Yet, the notion of authenticity and the aesthetic aura of a couture dress served the purpose of promoting, making popular and selling reproduction of the dress to the middle class.[7] Today, the concept of the designer as visionary is persistent. Both Breward[8] and Kawamura[9] discuss the institutionalised mythology surrounding the fashion designer and how the myth facilitates the promotion of fashion, continuing to support a commercial discourse whereby what Polhemus calls "fantasy garments"[10], or 'wearable art', are presented on the catwalk to create media attention.

2. Copyright

Since the explosion of the knowledge economy and intellectual property rights, and since, from the 1970s, designers and brands understood the economic utility of licensing products under the brand name, fashion copyright has become a pressing issue. Licensing practices intensified from the 1980s when luxury labels were grouped in large conglomerates through a practice of progressive acquisitions. Thus legislation has been put in place to

protect fashion design from cheap knock-offs through the registration of designs. Despite this, legislation varies greatly in different countries and is still limited to a few elements: the two-dimension pattern, original printed fabric and man-made fibre. The premise at the base of intellectual property protection of fashion design is that fashion design is included in the copyright act as a form of work similar to literary or artistic work. France, for example, has a broad protection of fashion design because, as Balasescu explains, in France, "fashion creation is potentially protected under the incidence of two different rights: the right of authorship and the protection of designs and models".[11] But in the US and Canada, legislation separates artistic from functional, classifying clothing as "useful", whose reproduction does not infringe the copyright act.[12] Thus the concept of functionality is set against the concept of fashion as adornment. In reality, staple or iconic garments such as the little black dress, the cardigan, the blazer, the trench, the bomber jacket and so forth, despite the fact that they created archetypes, are impossible to patent or copyright. They have gone through processes of adaptation and innovation, crossing the boundary between functionality and fashionableness, and therefore closing the cultural divide between original and imitation, art and commerce.

1. Fashion adaptation

Adaptation is a social practice grounded in culture. This study looks at what consumers do with dress in two particular instances, gender practices in home dress-making, and cross-cultural exchanges of styles. The first case study has to do with women's engagement with fashion through home-dressmaking practices, briefly drawing from a pilot project on women and fashion in rural Australia and New Zealand. The second case study looks at the Harajuku phenomenon and outlines theoretical underpinnings that have to do with cross-cultural adaptation. Another occurrence of adaptation practices,

which is not explored here, would entail the writing of original and rigorous histories of individual garments to trace adaptation practices that have transformed the garment from functionality to fashionableness. In all case studies, analysis should investigate the garment in a triangular way: a focus on the actual garment itself; an identification of the strategies that have been employed to innovate design; and a reconstruction of the diversity of use of the garment by consumers in different contexts. The writing of these histories is particularly important to start moving towards an understanding of fashion as a place of exchange and hybridity instead of bricolage and pastiche.

Cultural adaptation occurs in many media and practices, ranging from television to film, to architecture, lifestyle and other forms of entertainment and consumption. As Moran defines it, cultural adaptation involves "multifarious processes of identification, adaptation, possible rearrangement and redeployment of cultural forms and styles, often in unexpected and highly productive circumstances".[13] In established forms of popular entertainment such as film, television, music, literature that are controlled by large conglomerates, adaptation is managed through copyright and trade, which establish boundaries, rules and forms of possible localisation and variation of a cultural product. In fashion, adaptation takes various forms that grow inside and outside the industry, are highly productive and are driven by both macro and micro forces. The reason for distinguishing what Moran calls the "twin approach" of macro and micro analysis[14] has to do with, on the one hand, the inner dynamics of the fashion industry, driven by accelerated fashion cycles and controlled by financial conglomerates and groups, and, on the other, individual agency, whereby adaptation is a way to reinvigorate individual creativity and originality. In the case of consumers, from the middle of the nineteenth century, copying images from magazines facilitated home dressmaking, with the adaptation of styles and designs to

women's own circumstances, fit, size and taste. In more recent times, women have used magazine patterns to make elegant clothes and look fashionable; these patterns were adapted from couture garments that were licensed by couture houses. In other instances, women unpicked garments and recreated patterns, making new designs and adding embellishment. Thus adaptation of clothes is far from being a tension in the fashion system; it is a process, or set of practices that is part and parcel of the industry, the fashion system and everyday practices of dressing.

The macro forces are epitomised by designers and couturiers, and are expressed through the globalising economy that has imposed standardisation and mass production in the fashion system. Today's global fashion industry provides great variety at a cheaper price and frequently, causing the phenomenon of *fast fashion.* Progressively, the wide availability of ready-to-wear and copies at a price point inspired by the clothes seen on the catwalks all over the world has made home sewing redundant. The adaptation or alteration of styles have been replaced by the mix and match practice, whereby various ready-made items, including accessories, are mixed to either imitate looks seen on the catwalks, or to invent new eclectic looks. Designers and big brands usually lament that copy and imitation threaten the industry and hamper creativity. The problem with this interpretation is that it rejects adaptation as a fundamental fashion practice. In the past, adaptation of patterns and their licensing by couture houses developed and maintained growth in the fashion industry at a time in which the ready-to-wear market was yet to be fully expanded. The recent re-conceptualisation of the fashion industry as creative economy has refocussed the economic agenda on the generation of knowledge and thus exploitation of intellectual rights. For this reason, the creation and control of property rights has become a pressing issue in the industry.

However, as aforementioned, in fashion, copyright is difficult to establish. Even when we see exclusive fashion design in the luxury market, we notice that inspiration may have come from many different sources, including fashion's own history and foreign cultures. These sources constitute knowledge content, while Aspers also argues for specific conditions of knowledge in which creative aesthetic work is allowed to emerge.[15] According to Aspers, designers also exchange information and knowledge through networks, art worlds and consumer markets.[16] Creative knowledge is thus contextual, and not solely based on the creative individual. This is an important theoretical approach because it shifts creativity onto adaptation, also recognising imitation of trends by designers as an important part of the fashion industry. Similarly, Potvin, quoting Homi Bhabha, rejects the essentialism of a prior given original culture, arguing instead for "acts of cultural translation" which recognise that all forms of culture are constantly engaged in transformation and hence are hybrid.[17] Referring to Armani's work, Potvin highlights how the sources of inspiration and "specifics of the borrowed original" (2010, p. 238),[18] are difficult or nearly impossible to identify, as Armani translates, or adapts, historical sources re-contextualising them to the moment of production. This important hypothesis can in fact be extended to all fashion production, rejecting the trite notion of fashion as pastiche and bricolage.

Adaptation involves interpretation or translation and transformation. The process is creative and refers specifically to actively engage with a set of operations or ideas that modify an existing product or concept into a new one. Fashion adaptation has taken various forms that are strictly connected with changes in the fashion system and with culture more generally; it is simultaneously global, in its dealings with franchising, and local, through

individual customising of patterns. In this case, from the consumer's point of view, home dressmaking involves the manipulation of garments, making and remaking, to create different styles and designs. This set of operations often involve unpicking existing clothes to copy patterns to make new garments with new fabrics or with different trims and decorations, or to adapt and modify an existing sleeve into a different design. In other instances, patterns licensed by couture houses are employed to create copies of an "original', as in the case of Rowen and the Chanel suit.[19] In this case, a Chanel suit trickled down to a mother and a daughter, who lived in a small village in New Zealand, in the form of a pattern from a couture original, licensed to a magazine and distributed via the magazine. Their adaptation process was based on a deep knowledge of, and engagement with, the materiality of fashion: properties of textiles, transformation from a two-dimensional form to a tri-dimensional one, sketching, understanding of sizing, knowledge of stitches, fit and form, and, eventually, creation of surface embellishments. From merely reproducing a couture suit that was laid out for them, it can be argued that Rowen and her mother designed their clothes, because they were making meaningful objects. The "Chanel suit" was worn on special occasions, such as Sunday Church gatherings and special trips to the nearby town.

Growing up in Dalby in the 1950s, approximately two hundred fifty kilometres east from Brisbane, in Queensland, the Jones sisters had few possibilities to be fashionable. The local haberdashery provided ready-made items such as jeans, shirts, work-wear, hosiery and underwear. All the sisters had been taught how to sew by their mother, but availability of quality fabric was limited. Through reading the American magazine *Seventeen*, which promoted the latest fashions and advice and instructions that emphasised the rules of good taste, they were on trend. In the process of copying, through

adaptation and transformation of McCall patterns, available at the local haberdashery, the Jones sisters helped each other to adapt the most difficult garments to look appropriately fashionable. Their versions of glamorous clothes were more comfortable and functional, without sacrificing style and elegance. They were worn for special occasions (the Saturday night dance), articulating their preferences and tastes.

This form of adaptation has been linked to a re-definition and re-evaluation of gender practice in home dressmaking. Significant studies in this area have been developed from within a feminist and gender studies perspective. Most notably, Cheryl Buckley documents her historical analysis of making and designing clothes at home through the study of life and design activities of a group of women in England between 1910 and 1960.[20] Angela Partington focuses on British women's take on Dior's New Look and their practices of appropriation of a style commonly considered as ornamental and restrictive.[21] Released in the immediate post-war period, only a minority of women could afford to buy Dior's originals, but in the following years, the New Look trickled down to department stores; patterns were also issued under the branding of renowned fashion magazines. Christian Dior controlled the diffusion of the New Look by licensing the production of paper patterns to manufacturers and retailers a month after the original garments were shown in Paris. In this way, manufacturers and retailers could sell an "Original-Christian-Dior-Copy".[22] The same patterns were used at home to make adapted version of the New Look. Partington shows that in the 1950s British women demonstrated agency through the transformation of the New Look in an elegant and functional style by incorporating some of its design elements in their everyday clothing. In both studies, women emerged as skilled designers and producers of fashion in their own rights, challenging common views about their passivity and deference to the elite designers.

The second form of adaptation involves the restyling of clothes, jewels, ornaments and make-up from other cultures. The inclusion of these items in everyday dress is usually defined as appropriation. This form of adaptation entails a transfer of meaning from one culture to another and reflects eclecticism. In the case of designers, the interaction with other cultures is part of the creative process of designing from a stimulus. One illuminating example is Paul Poiret's (1879-1944) adaptation of Oriental dress – the ancient Greek *chiton*, the *kimono*, and the *kaftan* – which not only demonstrated his enthusiasm for the Orient, but, importantly, revolutionised women's fashion by dispensing with corsetry and providing elegant and functional fashion at once. In the middle of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the fascination with the Orient was inspired by travel, anthropological and archaeological discoveries; African and Oriental aesthetics emerged through colonial interests and scientific discoveries, but, especially, provided a utopian alternative to the austerity of industrial capitalist development. Yves Saint Laurent's 1967 Bambara collection contained beaded dresses of African inspiration, while his Saharienne safari jacket was launched in 1968; animal prints re-appeared in the 1980s and more recently in the 2004 Dolce & Gabbana collection. In 2009, Marc Jacobs, Dior, Lanvin and Junya Watanabe have used ethnic and African designs. John Galliano has been inspired by Japanese samurai costume, kimono and origami for various Dior's couture collections (Spring/Summer 2007 and Spring/Summer 2008). Such consistent engagement with the Orient and Africa entails an act of translation and , one that evokes nostalgia more than bricolage or pastiche.

Borrowing clothes across cultures creates interesting hybrid appearances that mix local culture and foreign influences. Often this fusion is

functional to the creation of new identities that use these new styles in different contexts and with different meanings, which often are not necessarily understood by the original group. The concept of "cultural authentication"[23] can be used as theoretical understanding of fashion adaptation across cultures. Usually labelled as appropriation, and seen in an exploitative way, adaptation of clothes from other cultures can be explained through a process of cultural authentication, whereby an "outside aesthetic influence is integrated into and becomes part of an existing style tradition"[24]. The creative transformation presents four stages: selection, characterisation, incorporation and transformation, but not necessarily consequential. These stages end with the final internalisation, acceptance and integration of the borrowed artefact by the accepting culture as a means to internalise the outside influence. In this process, exotic cultures offer sub-cultural groups an allure of otherness that promises individuality, distinction and, often, forms of resistance.

Harajuku is a well-known case of cross-cultural fashion fertilisation and offers an interesting case study that aptly illustrates cultural authentication through adaptation. At the end of the Second World War Harajuku was the site of US military residence; it emerged as a meeting ground for the Japanese youth that congregated there to see Western products.[25] From the middle of the 1980s, Japanese youth adopted Western street fashion directly from British mods, punks and Victorian fashion, incorporating traditional British textiles. This work of cultural translation and adaptation included also the integration of traditional elements of Japanese ancient dress with vintage and second hand items. The Harajuku phenomenon was a response to de-individualised styles, and represented a critique of the traditional and formal role of women in Japanese society and culture. The integration of Japanese cultural symbols from *manga* and animé

characters with Western (British) sub-cultural and traditional styles produced an eclectic mix that challenged and redefined the notion of what is fashionable. This sartorial and gender redefinition of aesthetic eventually evolved in a myriad of sub-cultures, creating multiple interactions between Japanese teen-agers. Make-up and fashion items and brands are incorporated in specific styles and named according to an aesthetic or lifestyle that they come to represent. Thus groups known as *Kogal*, *Ganguro*, *Yamamba*, *Lolita*, and so forth, stand for an authenticated way of life and aesthetic, according to Tonye Eeerokisima's cultural authentication concept. The phenomenon of Harajuku Street fashion put Tokyo on the global fashion map, inspiring more than the youth contained in one-square-mile within the city. Harajuku fashion not only circulated back to Western youth who adapted some references to popular culture, such as *manga* characters which were integrated in their everyday style, but also forced Western designers to take notice. Importantly, the Harajuku phenomenon has formed a new business model and a system with specific diffusion strategies that is independent from the mainstream fashion system.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the conditions that have allowed the concepts of fashion original and copy to emerge and continue as interdependent practices of the fashion system. I have argued that the concept of adaptation provides a better model to explain fashion's historicism and practices that involve processes of translation, transformation and re-contextualisation of garments in cross-cultural contexts and trans-historically. At a micro level these practices have shifted from making, which requires a deep knowledge of fashion, to mix-and-match, as the market has become more open and focussed on mass production and consumption. Adaptation involves localisation and indigenisation (as in the case of style tribes and sub-

cultural groups). To understand what consumers do with clothing, I have proposed that by combining Homi Bhabha's suggestion of the "third space" as the creation of hybrids that displace the histories that constitute them, and Tonye Eerekosima's process of "cultural authentication" it is possible to form a theory of fashion adaptation that explains processes of transformation and circulation of styles among consumers.

Conversely, concerns with copy and copyright issues are part of hard-core market strategies of conglomerates when it comes to sell their products and protect their profit.

Notes

[1] Partington, Angela, "Popular fashion and working class affluence", in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, J. Ash & E. Wilson (eds), Harper Collins, London, p. 145.
[2] See Jennifer Menchen's account in Menchen, Jennifer, "A design for the copyright of fashion", *Intellectual Property and Technology Forum*, Boston College Law School.
[3] See Cox and Jenkins, in Cox, Christine and Jenkins, Jennifer, 2005, "Between the seams, a fertile commons: An overview of the relationship between Fashion and Intellectual property", *Ready to Share: Fashion and the Ownership of Creativity*, A Norman Lear Center Conference, USC Annenberg School of Communication, January 29.
[4] Aspers, Patrick, "Contextual knowledge", *Current Sociology*, vol. 54, no 6, p. 746.
[5] Williamson, Dugald, 1989, *Authorship and Criticism*, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney, p. 7.
[6] Lipovetsky, Gilles, 1994, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
[7] Troy, Nancy 2003, *Couture Culture*: *A Study in Modern Art and Fashion*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), London: The MIT Press.
[8] Breward, Christopher, 2003, *Fashion*, Oxford University Press, London, p. 34.
[9] Kawamura, Yuniya, 2005, *Fashion-ology, An Introduction to fashion studies*, Berg, Oxford, New York, p. 65.
[10] Polhemus, Ted, "Implications for the appearance-alteration industries", in *The Fashion Reader*, L. Welters and A. Lillethun (eds), Berg, Oxford and New York, p. 410.
[11] A Balasescu, 2005, "After authors: Signifying fashion from Paris to Tehran", *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 10, p. 210.
[12] J Katz, 2009, "IP Protection for fashion designs: Limited in scope, but available", *Ottawa Business Journal*, 1 December.
[13] A Moran, 2009, "Introduction: The global flow of creative ideas", *Continuum*, vol. 23, n. 2, p. 109.
[14] Ibid, p. 110.
[15] Aspers, p. 746.
[16] Ibid.
[17] J Potvin, 2010, "Cross-dressing fashion and furniture: Giorgio Armani, Orientalism and nostalgia", in *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*, A. Myzelev and J. Potvin (eds), Ashgate, Farnham (UK), p. 238.
[18] Ibid.
[19] This is a case study part of a pilot project on dress and fashionableness in rural Australia and New Zealand.
[20] C Buckley, 1998, "On the Margins: Theorizing the History and Significance of Making and Designing Clothes at Home", *Journal of Design History*, vol. 11, no. 2.
[21] Partington, op. cit.
[22] Brenninkmeyers in Partington, p. 271.
[23] Tonye Eerekosima in A Lynch and M D Strauss, 2007, *Changing Fashion*: *A critical introduction to trend analysis and meaning*, Berg, Oxford/New York. p. 154.
[24] Lynch and Strauss, p. 154.
[25] T Godoy and I Vartanian, 2007, "Harajuku made me do it", in *Tokyo Street Style: Fashion in Harajuku*, T. Godoy (ed.), Thames and Hudson, London, p. 5.

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